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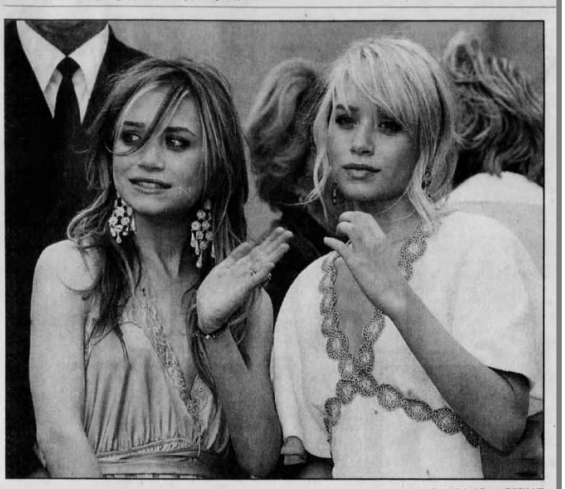

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Celebrity twins Mary-Kate, left, and Ashley Olsen waved to fans following dedication ceremonies for their star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in Los Angelesin April.

Olsen twins, now 18, face challenges of adult stardom

By Anne D'Innocenzio
ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — Ever since they were babies, Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen have had a huge and loyal fan following that has turned the twin actresses into merchandise moguls as well. Now that they're 18, they'll start learning whether they still have that same appeal as grown-ups.

They face some hard decisions, such as whether to leave behind the sugar-sweet films and videos they're known for and start working on more mature projects. It's hard to tell whether the twins, who made their TV debut as infants on ABC's sitcom "Full House" in the late 1980s, can adopt an edgier style without alienating parents and young consumers.

And the Olsens — who became presidents of their empire, Dualstar Entertainment Group, when they turned 18 on June 13 — are already coping with grown-up business problems.

Their movie "New York Minute" was a disappointment, attracting mostly girls under 11. And Mary-Kate Olsen, who has been battling anorexia, is now in a treatment facility; her condition has forced the twins to cancel a trip this summer to Australia to promote "New York Minute."

"Right now, Mary-Kate's health is the top priority for her family, friends and colleagues at Dualstar, its vendors and retail partners here and around the world," said Michael Pagnotta, the twins' publicist. But he said the marykateandashley brand is "a strong and growing business that will continue to thrive."

One image consultant believes that if Mary-Kate Olsen can't beat the eating disorder, it could cause problems for the company.

"You don't buy products because you feel sorry for the person," said Paul Wilmot, a New York-based public relations executive.

The setback comes as the twins are expected to play an even bigger role in the decision-making process of Los Angeles-based Dualstar, even as they head to New York University this fall.

The company is a huge enterprise, with sales of marykateandashley books, videos, dolls, clothing, accessories, and cosmetics expected to reach $1 billion this year, according to Robert Thorne, the entertainment lawyer who founded the company in 1993.

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>
> **Robert Thorne**
> *entertainment lawyer and founder of Los Angeles-based Dualstar*

About 15 percent of gross revenues comes from sales overseas; by 2006, that figure should reach anywhere from 30 percent to 40 percent.

Thorne expects the twins, as they get older, to be able to appeal to a cross-section of fans.

"There is every intention to continue to nurture and celebrate the young customer base, and safely pursue the teen and young adult customer," Thorne said. "Just as The Walt Disney Company produces feature films under the Disney and Touchstone labels, respectively. Different audiences for us. But all positive values."

The twins don't seem worried about overcoming their image as those little kids on "Full House," whose constant televised reruns could hurt efforts to appear more mature in new entertainment projects.

"I don't think there is anything to overcome," wrote Mary-Kate Olsen in an e-mail. "It's great that whole new generations of young kids get to know us through the very successful reruns of 'Full House' on Nick at Nite and ABC Family, or our books, fashion dolls, CDs, videos and DVDs, and our Web sites. We never really think about image."

The business is expected to evolve somewhat, focusing more on fashion and accessories and less on electronics and other gadgets aimed at young girls. The twins also hope to relaunch their defunct magazine, called Mary-KateandAshley, although they face a skittish advertising community that hasn't been eager to embrace new magazines tied to a personality in light of Martha Stewart's legal problems.

The twins plan to start a fashion magazine bearing their name overseas in 2005 to prove to U.S. publishers they'll be successful here.

The Olsens signed a 10-year contract of partnership at age 16 with Thorne, who became chief executive of Dualstar. Both have "substantial" ownership of the company, although Thorne declined to elaborate on percentages.

Now that they're 18, the Olsens also have taken control of their $300 million personal fortune.

"Because we've earned everything we have through hard work, we are very cautious about the way we spend and invest our money," Mary-Kate Olsen wrote.

While in college, the pair is expected to spend less time on the business, with Dualstar's employees running the day-to-day operations. However, the duo nonetheless will be able to closely work with suppliers in New York and be more involved in management of their company, Thorne said.

"They'll be freer to make decisions," said Judy Swartz, senior vice president and executive designer at Dualstar, who works closely with the twins on designing their products, which are sold at Wal-Mart and other stores. One idea the twins are considering is adding a more upscale label bearing their first initials called MKA.

But would they consider doing projects separately?

Ashley Olsen's reply: "We are sisters, and we are in business together so we will always be working together on some level. I'm sure we will be working separately as well. ... We are open to every option, and we are considering some right now, but we're not in any rush."

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